The Vibrancy of the Academic Community

1 Psychological theses

In the late 1980s, the theory of ritualized violence and the quest for social status gained ground among researchers in the UK (Ingham 1989) and influenced the work of scholars elsewhere. Taken up in France by Michel Raspoud (1990), it was also developed in Italy by Alessandro Salvini (1988) who, as well as adopting its main points, supplemented it by pointing to patterns of domination–aggression and the search for identity/group membership. According to Salvini, football hooliganism was the symbolic expression of domination behaviour which, though not entirely ritualized, derived from belonging to a group of football supporters and the status that this conferred on young people who were going through an identity crisis. He also saw it as being closely bound up with many situational variables, ranging from the architecture of stadia to the rules and values of sporting events, specific forms of group behaviour and the highs and lows of matches.

Another Italian researcher, Alessandro Dal Lago, used these same elements to explain the phenomenon. Carrying on from the work of Marsh, he took the view that, in most cases, the violence employed by football hooligans was of a symbolic nature since it manifested itself mainly through gestures, insults and chanting. On the rare occasions when this descended into actual violence, it was due partly to an established tradition of enmity between rival gangs of football supporters and partly to certain situational parameters linked to the progress of the match (Dal Lago 1990a; Dal Lago and Moscati 1992; Dal Lago and De Biasi 1994).

The situational approach, also taken by Anthony King (1995), prevailed too in the work carried out by a Belgian research team who,
starting from the principle that in certain contexts individuals lose their free will, attributed the phenomenon mainly to the crowd situation, the violent nature of football as a spectacle, flawed policing, the physical environment, the consumption of alcohol and the ideological beliefs of the supporters (Dunand 1987; Rimé et al. 1988; Leyens and Rimé 1988).

In the 1990s, psychological studies focused increasingly on certain factors that were believed to exacerbate football hooliganism. In one of these, Bruna Zani and Erich Kirchler (1991) laid particular stress on strong identification with the football club, academic failure and the group effect. In the Netherlands, Hans van der Brug (1990, 1994) concluded that football hooliganism could not be dissociated from the breakdown of parental authority and the high level of academic failure among young violent football supporters. Such behaviour therefore demonstrated, above all, the crisis that contemporary societies were undergoing as a result of the crumbling of value systems and the traditional forms of social control.

Reflecting the importance given since the 1980s to situational approaches in theories concerning the analysis and management of crime and security in postmodern societies (Clarke 1995; Shearing 2001), the idea that football hooliganism is associated with a whole series of situational variables raises a number of problems. First, even though it has the virtue of underlining the role that many different situational factors may play, by focusing on these it ends up denying the personalities of the actors themselves. The behaviour of football hooligans is no longer seen as the outcome of a conscious decision, but as the product of many different impersonal parameters which, if only they could be altered, would be sufficient to bring about the desired change in behaviour.

The limitations set on the explanatory scope of determinist approaches as a result of their inherent reduction of reality were well illustrated by the findings of the research conducted in Greece in the late 1980s by Christos Tsouramanis (1988). According to Tsouramanis, although it was possible to establish some significant correlations between outbreaks of violence and the existence of certain factors likely to precipitate such incidents, these were not sufficient in and of themselves to explain the phenomenon, which remained largely a random occurrence since it relied on human initiative.

Similar reservations were expressed a little later by Gerry Finn (1994) who, based on his studies of Scottish football supporters, believed that the phenomenon could not be explained without looking at the psychological state of the actors. In his view, football hooligans were, first